Young Adult Crossover Fiction: Crumbling Borders between Adolescents and Adults

Without any question, young adult fiction has represented one of the fastest growing and most interesting publishing fields for some time now—just ask book publishers and librarians. In its relatively short history, an amazing variety of groundbreaking works have emerged. The adults writing these novels focus on young adults grappling with the quest of coming to terms with their roots and identity, of learning to distinguish between authenticity and artifice, and of finding a place for themselves within the framework of life. Since literature reflects and represents reality, these authors have increasingly confronted adolescents with the changing sociopolitical facets of the modern world. As one taboo after another has fallen—frank language, drug addiction, domestic violence, sexuality, terrorism, suicide, gender orientation, and madness—and a contrived or unconvincing moral has not been hauled in to tidy up the final pages of the old fashioned *problem* novel, questions have been raised about what young adults should read.

Traditionally, adults have assumed that teenagers in high school should be assigned classics of adult fiction, even if they lack the life experience to understand, for example, the tormented passions of Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*. As a result, many teenage readers abandon reality and shift their focus to popular commercial writers like Danielle Steel, Stephen King, and John Grisham. These writers at least confront their audiences with violence and evil that a media-dominated world reminds us of continually, whether it be through the reportage of the daily news, television talk and reality shows, films with gratuitous violence, or internet chatrooms. Teachers of Advanced Placement high school classes preparing students for college, however, now often assign such morally ambiguous works of contemporary literature as Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*. These works plunge readers into the world of racism and warfare that are part of 21st Century life.

The resurgence of interest in young adults by literary authors and publishers reflects an attempt to offer older adolescents stories that confront reality frankly. As with any area of literature, the best books are the ones that depict life honestly and accurately, present characters that evoke understanding or even self-identification, and offer insights into experiences both familiar and unknown. These novels are thus not about sensational topics, but rather about how such problems are sometimes part of the experience of life; likewise, these books suggest that the movement to adulthood need not be a descent into contemptible compromise, but rather an assertion of one's connection with the ambiguous nature of humanity.

Perhaps as interesting is the number of adults who read young adult fiction. Is it because some of our best writers work in this area, or something more? Our sense of wonder is provoked. Are adult parents or grandparents trying to understand the world of their own children or the next generation? Are they exploring their own past, the memories and feelings of those years imbedded in their conscious and unconscious mind? Are they trying to understand better what happened to them in how they came of age or did not at an earlier period? Or perhaps more, is coming of age an experience not limited to one age or one time in life? Are we always trying to come of age at the stage of life we find our self? Life does not seem static in our time. The most compelling figure on social and emotional development in the west, Erik Erikson, for example, puts forward a life cycle theory suggesting we confront points of crisis at varied stages of life. The crumbling of rigid distinctions between the conventional borders of young adult and adult experiences may very well reflect the reality that good young adult fiction generates crossover works for adults.

The foremost writer in this resurgence, Robert Cormier, whose 1974 title *The Chocolate War* signaled the beginning of the young adult field, has said: "I write for the intelligent reader, and the intelligent reader is often fourteen or sixteen years old. A work of fiction, if true, written honestly, will set off shocks of recognition in the sensitive reader, no matter what age the reader is. And I write for this reader." When some have complained that these works fail to offer positive authority figures or happy endings, Cormier has responded: "As long as what I write is true and believable, why should I have to create happy endings? My books are an antidote to the TV view of life where even in the most suspenseful show you know that Starsky and Hutch will get their man. That's phony realism. Life just isn't like that." The popularity of these novels might suggest that Cormier has tapped into the world that many teenagers already know. Such readings can help young adults understand their world as well as learn to think and be discriminating in the development of a level of taste.

In this series, we will read novelists who have won major awards in their field. Two are National Book Award winners in Young Adult Fiction, one has won the Michael L. Printz Award for Excellence in Young Adult Literature, one author won the Neustadt Prize for Children's Literature given by the University of Oklahoma, and two have won the Margaret A. Edwards Award for distinction of a body of work in young adult literature. The authors reflect different genders and ethnicities as do their protagonists. The novels are written in different forms, from screenplay as courtroom drama, diary, free verse, and more conventional narrative. All have in common one description essential in what is referred to as a young adult novel: the protagonist, younger than twenty one, writes in first person point of view.

Another psychological thriller by Cormier, *After the First Death*, launches the series. The image and the intrigue of a hijacked school bus on a bridge provide context for an exploration of a complex pair of father-son relationships as well as the paradoxical nature of fanaticism, whether it occurs in the form of terrorism or patriotism. In *Monster*, Walter Dean Myers renders the voice of an African-American male struggling to understand why he is in jail and to what extent is he guilty—a searching beyond what a court of law can determine as guilt or innocence. With *True Believer,* the middle book of an acclaimed trilogy*,* Virginia Ewer Wolff explores a female striving for dignity and a sense of belonging in an underserved high school and neighborhood as her widowed mother struggles with barriers of economics and class. Sherman Alexie offers a major satiric and mythical work about a Native person's desire to find a place to be, one without the limits of the reservation or the white world, in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian.* Acclaimed novelist Jamaica Kincaid, originally from Caribbean Antigua, reminisces in *Annie John* on the challenge to become a self, both as more than a mother's daughter and a colonial object. To paraphrase poet W. H. Auden's famous comment, no good young adult novel was written for young adults only.

***After the First Death* (1979)**
by Robert Cormier

Cormier has traced the origin of this brilliant novel to his experience as a father. Recalling how much his children admired him, he remembers pondering how terrible it would be if a parent exploited this unquestionable admiration. He then began to wonder whether or not innocence could be an evil disguise for "the monstrous." If one were only innocent, the importance of the need to question or contemplate questioning would not develop. These thoughts represent seeds for the kernel themes in *After the First Death*. Through a richly textured narrative structure, Cormier juxtaposes the haunting parallels between two relational pairs: sixteen year old preppie Ben and his patriotic father General Marchand, who masterminds a secret anti-terrorist army project, and the terrorist teenager Miro and his mentor Artkin, who masterminds a brotherhood of freedom fighters trying to regain their homeland. The complex disguises and betrayals of trust are dramatized amidst the suspense of a hijacked school bus full of small children and their teenage bus driver, Kate. The relationship that develops between Kate and Miro adds additional complexity and tension to the story. In addition, the use of multiple narrators provides varied perspectives on issues that ultimately can only be ambiguous. The title, too, offers richness in its allusion to a Dylan Thomas' poem; each of the characters has a "first death" as well as perhaps a "second."

***Monster* (1999)**
by Walter Dean Myers

Myers, like Cormier, has been acknowledged for the body of his many award-winning novels. Sixteen year old Steve finds himself in jail on trial for a murder he is not sure he had anything to do with, or anything significantly to do with. In spite of his middle class status, he is a black teenager in Manhattan who may have simply been in the wrong place at the wrong time. However, he is unsure and feels like he has walked into the middle of a film uncertain if he belongs. To probe his recent past, he decides while waiting in jail for his trial to make his own movie in his head, to write a screenplay to come to terms with his own experience. He wants to discover if he is what the prosecutor calls him: a "Monster." His white attorney insists his portrayal of himself as innocent must never falter even while his journal entries and flashbacks cause him to question himself. We also learn he is a member of a film club, and he contends that on the day of the murder, he was checking locations for a new movie he was going to film. Myers finds adult challenges to young adult fiction disturbing because his own interviews of juveniles in jail show him that they "have to make decisions under the pressures of the moment instead of having the benefit of previous discussions in the classroom or around the dinner table." And he goes on to add that "literature can, to an extent, replace these discussions" in families that have made difficult topics taboo.

***True Believer* (2001)**
by Virginia Ewer Wolff

Luminous Wolff pens her novel in lines of free verse that capture the flow of feelings and thoughts running across the psyche of fifteen year old LaVaughn, determined to go to college and grow beyond the socioeconomic class she struggles within. A National Book Award winner, *True Believer* dramatizes the life of a strong student who dreams of something more than inner city obstacles. Conflicts with girlfriends who try to escape the real feelings of emergent adolescence by retreating within a distortion of religious meaning add to her sense of isolation. Difficulties in the relationship with her friend Jody lead LaVaughn to challenge her self-confidence and question her identity. In spite of the emotional intensity of her strong relationship with her mother, she begins to lose her grip on reality. Wolff creates her characters without identifying them with a specific racial group and thus suggests the universality of the barriers class erects for many young adults. As the novel's title suggests, LaVaughn will have to decide if she believes in possibility, in the hope that she can remain resilient in the process of coming of age.

***The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian* (2007)**
by Sherman Alexie

A National Book Award winner like Wolff, Alexie ranks as one of the most acclaimed writers of his generation and a major force in the renaissance of Native American literature. Like all of the writers in this series, he incarnates the reality that good young adult novels inevitably attract some groups who want to ban books. Growing up bullied on a Spokane Indian reservation with a stutter and a lisp, protagonist Arnold, or Junior, decides that to get a good education he must transfer to all-white Reardan high school in a neighboring town where the only other Indian is the school mascot. To survive being accused as a traitor by his own people and being mocked by his new peers, Arnold resorts to humor and wit in a mythical struggle to rise above the life everyone expects him to live. A cartoonist, Arnold also draws, and this magical novel thus combines both his diary and graphic images to chart his hero journey. Poet, film director, novelist, stand-up comedian, and brilliant satirist, Alexie, in the footsteps of Ralph Ellison, dramatizes the quest of a Native person to become visible to the world and to himself. Can Arnold learn to forge an identity not just as an Indian, but as a person from many different tribes?

***Annie John* (1983)**
by Jamaica Kincaid

Master storyteller in fiction and non-fiction acclaimed by virtually all, Kincaid finds her work marketed for adults and young adults, and actually probably more to the former than the latter—and her work thus truly crosses over those supposed borders between audience ages. With *Annie John*, she tells the semiautobiographical tale of a young girl coming of age in the 1950s and 1960s in Antigua. Focusing on the fierce and ambivalent bonds of a mother's love, one similar to but distinctive from Wolff's LaVaughn's with her mother, Kincaid creates Annie and her universal struggle to grow within but beyond the power of a mother's care for her child. Growing up in what could seem a paradise along the ocean on Antigua, Annie exalts in the all-consuming devotion of her mother's time and care, at least until she turns twelve. Then her life changes in ways often mysterious to her: she instinctively rebels against authority both in the figure of her mother and in the cultural assumptions of her colonized British island education. She revolts from her mother's unconditional adoration and the trunk that symbolically stores the totem objects of her past. Torn between love and hate, attraction and revulsion, Annie wrestles with the need to escape from the mother she once knew and now begins to mourn. In deciding her future, she reflects "whether for the rest of my life I would be able to tell when it was really my mother and when it was really her shadow

standing between me and the rest of the world." Like Arnold, she faces the need to grow beyond her past that will still always be within her. For all of the characters in this series and for all of us, shedding the skin to transform and come of age at new stages in life is never easy.

"Young Adult Crossover Fiction: Crumbling Borders between Adolescents and Adults" was developed by Dr. Harbour Winn, Professor Emeritus of English at Oklahoma City University, where he teaches courses in literature, film studies, and Montessori education. He has been involved in public humanities programs for many years and was the Humanities Scholar on the grant that first brought the "Let's Talk About It" program to Oklahoma. This is the sixth series theme he has developed. At OCU, he has directed the Center for Interpersonal Studies through Film & Literature for its first 19 years and the OCU Film Institute since 1982.